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REVIEW ARTICLE

Enhancing academic well-being in Bangladesh: Lessons from school culture research

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Abstract. The education system in Bangladesh remains heavily exam-oriented, often at the expense of students' psychological well-being and holistic development. This article explores how reforming school culture–defined as the network of beliefs, practices, and relationships that shape the learning environment–can enhance academic well-being. Drawing from global best practices and empirical studies, particularly in socio-economically similar contexts, the article advocates for integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL), improving teacher training, reducing educational inequality, and implementing constructivist or project-based assessment methods. These interventions can create a more inclusive, student-centered environment that promotes both academic success and emotional resilience. The scope of this article is conceptual and policy-oriented, aiming to synthesize evidence and propose actionable strategies rather than report findings from original empirical research. Limitations include the absence of primary data and the need for contextual adaptation of international models to Bangladesh's unique socio-cultural setting. Practical implications of SEL integration include improved classroom climate, reduced student anxiety, and enhanced interpersonal skills–factors increasingly vital for 21st-century education. Ultimately, the article emphasizes that fostering positive school culture is essential for sustainable education reform in Bangladesh.

Keywords: School Culture, Academic Success, Psychological Well-Being, Socio-Emotional Learning, Educational Policys

Abstrak. Sistem pendidikan di Bangladesh masih sangat berorientasi pada ujian, sering kali mengorbankan kesejahteraan psikologis dan perkembangan holistik siswa. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana reformasi budaya sekolah–yang didefinisikan sebagai jaringan keyakinan, praktik, dan hubungan yang membentuk lingkungan belajar–dapat meningkatkan kesejahteraan akademik. Dengan mengacu pada praktik terbaik global dan studi empiris, khususnya di konteks sosial ekonomi yang serupa, artikel ini merekomendasikan integrasi pembelajaran sosial-emosional (SEL), peningkatan pelatihan guru, pengurangan ketimpangan pendidikan, serta penerapan metode penilaian konstruktivis atau berbasis proyek. Intervensi-intervensi ini dapat menciptakan lingkungan yang lebih inklusif dan berpusat pada siswa, yang mendukung keberhasilan akademik sekaligus ketahanan emosional. Cakupan artikel ini bersifat konseptual dan berorientasi pada kebijakan, dengan tujuan mensintesis bukti dan mengusulkan strategi yang dapat ditindaklanjuti, bukan menyajikan temuan dari penelitian empiris asli. Keterbatasan mencakup ketiadaan data primer dan perlunya adaptasi kontekstual dari model internasional ke dalam situasi sosio-kultural khas Bangladesh. Implikasi praktis dari integrasi SEL antara lain adalah peningkatan iklim kelas, penurunan kecemasan siswa, dan peningkatan keterampilan interpersonal–faktor-faktor yang semakin penting dalam pendidikan abad ke-21. Pada akhirnya, artikel ini menekankan bahwa penguatan budaya sekolah yang positif merupakan elemen kunci dalam reformasi pendidikan yang berkelanjutan di Bangladesh.

Kata kunci: Budaya Sekolah, Keberhasilan Akademik, Kesejahteraan Psikologis, Pembelajaran Sosial-Emosional, Kebijakan Pendidikan.

INTRODUCTION

School culture refers to the set of beliefs, relationships, norms, and practices that define the educational environment within an institution. A supportive school culture is widely recognized for its role in enhancing academic achievement, fostering psychological well-being, and promoting holistic student development (Deal & Peterson, 2016). In the context of Bangladesh, the education system remains predominantly exam-oriented,

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characterized by rote memorization, high-stakes assessments, and rigid teaching methods. This has created an environment that prioritizes performance over psychological safety and emotional development (Rahman et al., 2023). Studies from South Asia indicate that such models have led to elevated levels of academic stress, anxiety, and burnout among students, particularly in countries like Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka, where success in examinations is culturally and economically emphasized (Sultana & Nahar, 2022).

The intense pressure to perform academically in Bangladesh's education system results in a competitive atmosphere that undermines student motivation, creativity, and well-being. Several studies have established a strong association between examination pressure and increased levels of depression and disengagement among students (Akter & Barua, 2025; Rahman et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of school culture as a mediating factor in promoting academic well-being. This article addresses this gap by exploring how transforming school culture can offer sustainable pathways for enhancing students' psychological and academic outcomes.

In addition to the psychological consequences of exam-driven education, there is a growing call within the educational policy discourse in Bangladesh to reform systemic structures that perpetuate inequity and disengagement. By examining school culture through the lens of global best practices and grounded in socio-cultural realities, this article contributes to the national conversation on educational reform. Specifically, the findings and arguments aim to inform policymakers and educators on feasible approaches to restructure the learning environment, thereby aligning educational goals with student well-being and national development priorities (UNESCO, 2025).

Theoretically, this study draws on the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that fulfillment of three basic psychological needs–autonomy, competence, and relatedness–is critical for motivation, performance, and well-being. A school culture that supports these needs can empower students to thrive both academically and emotionally (Bozhani et al., 2025). Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, the prevalent hierarchical structure in schools suppresses student voice and autonomy, which undermines emotional resilience and learning engagement. This paper, therefore, advocates for a shift towards a more inclusive, student-centered educational culture that integrates socio-emotional learning and respects students' psychological needs as part of its core mission.

THE CRISIS: BANGLADESH'S EXAM-ORIENTED SCHOOL CULTURE

The exam-oriented nature of Bangladesh's education system continues to impose disproportionate psychological burdens on students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Structural inequalities between urban and rural regions exacerbate these pressures. According to data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS, 2023), students in rural schools are nearly 60% less likely to have access to trained counselors or psychological services, and only 27% of rural schools are equipped with functioning libraries or laboratories–essential components for a holistic learning environment. These disparities correlate with higher rates of academic disengagement, anxiety, and dropout among students in under-resourced schools (Tareque & Ahmed, 2024; Khan et al., 2022).

The psychological toll of this system is also evident in students' lived experiences. A study by Haque and Sultana (2023) documented personal narratives from secondary students who described chronic stress, sleep disorders, and social withdrawal as by-products of the relentless focus on examinations. One student in the study stated, "I don't study to learn, I study to survive exams," encapsulating a widespread sentiment that learning has become a tool for survival rather than growth. These findings illustrate that the system fails to foster curiosity, creativity, or critical thinking, instead encouraging memorization at the expense of mental health and personal development.

Learning from international comparisons, countries such as Vietnam and Bhutan have implemented structural reforms that mitigate these challenges. Vietnam has gradually transitioned to a competency-based curriculum that emphasizes applied learning and teacher autonomy, yielding both strong academic outcomes and improved student satisfaction (OECD, 2020). Bhutan's integration of Gross National Happiness principles into its education policy–emphasizing emotional well-being, ethics, and cultural values–has led to lower dropout rates and stronger teacher-student relationships (Dorji, 2021). These models show that investing in school culture and socio-emotional learning can lead to both academic success and psychological resilience, even in resource-constrained settings.

Teachers play a pivotal role in either perpetuating or transforming the dominant exam-centric paradigm in Bangladesh. Yet, many are underprepared to address the emotional needs of students. According to BRAC (2022), less than 20% of teachers in secondary schools have received training in socio-emotional support or trauma-informed pedagogy. Additionally, high student-teacher ratios, rigid curricula, and pressure to deliver exam results constrain teachers' ability to innovate or empathize with students. The teacher-student dynamic often remains authoritarian, limiting student voice and contributing to a culture of silence around mental health issues. A cultural and policy shift is needed to empower teachers as facilitators of holistic development and emotional safety, rather than mere gatekeepers of academic achievement.

GLOBAL LESSONS: HOW SCHOOL CULTURE SHAPES ACADEMIC WELL-BEING

International research consistently highlights school culture as a foundational factor in shaping students' academic and emotional outcomes. A positive school culture fosters collaboration, inclusivity, and emotional safety–conditions that support student engagement, academic resilience, and social development (School of Education, 2022). Countries like Finland and the Netherlands have adopted holistic, student-centered educational frameworks that prioritize well-being alongside performance. In Finland, the integration of trust-based school management and minimal standardized testing has created learning environments where students feel empowered and less pressured (Sahlberg, 2015). The Netherlands promotes inclusive education with a strong emphasis on student autonomy and teacher collaboration, resulting in high levels of student satisfaction and motivation (Verhoeven et al., 2021).

The relevance of these international examples to the Bangladeshi context is strengthened by parallel reforms in socio-economically comparable countries. Vietnam, for

instance, has transitioned to a competency-based curriculum with a focus on critical thinking, creativity, and practical application. Despite limited resources, the country has maintained high performance in international assessments like PISA, while also reducing academic stress among students (OECD, 2020). Similarly, Bhutan has embedded the philosophy of Gross National Happiness in its education system, balancing cognitive learning with emotional and spiritual development. These models demonstrate that transformative change is possible even within resource-constrained settings–an insight especially relevant for Bangladesh.

To ground these global perspectives in theoretical understanding, Bozhani et al. (2025) conducted a large-scale study exploring how school culture enhances academic well-being by fulfilling students' basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Drawing from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), their findings showed that students in supportive school cultures reported significantly higher motivation, better stress management, and improved academic performance. The study emphasizes that when students feel respected, capable, and connected to peers and teachers, their psychological well-being becomes a powerful driver of learning. This insight is particularly useful for Bangladesh, where rigid hierarchies often undermine student agency and emotional expression.

Adapting these global best practices to the Bangladeshi context requires culturally sensitive strategies that address systemic constraints. First, school leaders must foster environments where student voices are valued and emotional safety is prioritized. This includes integrating socio-emotional learning into curricula, reforming disciplinary practices to be more restorative than punitive, and promoting peer mentoring programs. Second, teacher training programs must be revamped to include modules on inclusive pedagogy, emotional intelligence, and culturally responsive teaching. Finally, community and parental engagement should be strengthened to reinforce values of empathy, collaboration, and resilience beyond the classroom (UNESCO, 2025). By aligning these practices with Bangladesh's socio-cultural realities, policymakers can cultivate a school culture that not only improves academic outcomes but also supports the holistic development of students.

A CALL FOR REFORM: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BANGLADESH

To cultivate a healthier school culture in Bangladesh, targeted and multi-level policy reforms are essential. First, integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) into the national curriculum should not be treated as a supplemental agenda but rather as a core pedagogical principle. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE), should be tasked with developing contextually relevant SEL modules. These must be infused across subjects and grade levels. To ensure sustainability, a monitoring unit under the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) should oversee the implementation and assess school readiness through regular capacity audits (UNESCO, 2025).

Second, comprehensive teacher training reforms are critical. The National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM) and the National Curriculum and Training Institute (NCTI) must jointly develop and institutionalize professional development programs that emphasize psychological first aid, trauma-informed teaching, inclusive pedagogy, and mental health literacy (BRAC, 2022). These trainings should be embedded within the teacher certification and recertification process. To address implementation barriers–such as high teacher-student ratios, lack of substitute teachers, and limited incentives–the MoE should provide financial support for temporary teacher hiring and incentives for completion of certified mental health training modules.

Third, addressing educational inequality necessitates systemic support. Resource allocation should prioritize infrastructure and human capital investment in rural and underserved regions. District Education Offices (DEOs) must conduct annual needs assessments to identify resource gaps in schools and submit these for targeted funding under the Annual Development Programme (ADP). Public-private partnerships can also be leveraged to expand extracurricular, counseling, and digital learning services in underfunded schools (Chowdhury, 2024). A national equity index should be developed to track disparities and inform fund distribution.

Fourth, the reform of assessment systems should be driven by the Bangladesh Examination Development Unit (BEDU). Moving toward formative and competency-based assessments will require alignment with international standards while ensuring local adaptability. Pilot programs in select districts can test alternative assessment models, and feedback loops must be created to involve teachers, students, and parents in refining these systems (Woolcock, 2025).

However, these reform efforts may face significant barriers, including institutional resistance, limited funding, and lack of inter-agency coordination. To overcome these, a cross-sectoral task force composed of representatives from MoE, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), NGOs, teacher unions, and civil society should be established. This task force will coordinate implementation, develop communication campaigns to build public support, and ensure alignment across administrative tiers.

Evaluation is essential to gauge the success and scalability of these reforms. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should include reductions in student absenteeism and dropout rates, improvements in student mental health metrics, teacher satisfaction, and performance in holistic learning assessments. Longitudinal impact studies conducted by national research institutes such as the Bangladesh Education Research Network (BERN) can provide evidence-based feedback to policymakers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The future of Bangladesh's education system hinges on its ability to foster environments where students thrive not only academically, but also emotionally and socially. A transformation in school culture is essential–one that prioritizes psychological safety, student autonomy, and holistic development over rote memorization and exam performance. Without such a shift, academic excellence will continue to come at the cost of student well-being, undermining the long-term intellectual and socio-emotional development of the nation's youth.

To make this transformation actionable, specific stakeholder-based recommendations are necessary. For the government, this includes integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) into national curriculum frameworks, allocating budgets for mental health services in schools, and supporting nationwide teacher training on emotional intelligence and inclusive pedagogy. For school administrators, the focus should be on creating emotionally

safe school climates, facilitating peer mentorship programs, and ensuring accountability mechanisms that monitor both academic outcomes and student well-being indicators.

Teachers, as the linchpin of classroom culture, must be empowered through continuous professional development programs that go beyond subject mastery to include training on trauma-informed approaches and culturally responsive pedagogy. In parallel, community organizations and parents should be engaged as collaborative partners in promoting empathy, respect, and resilience among students both inside and outside of school environments.

To evaluate the success of these reforms, national education authorities should implement a set of performance indicators such as reduced dropout rates, improved student satisfaction surveys, lower instances of school-related anxiety, and teacher reports on classroom engagement. When tailored to Bangladesh's socio-cultural context, such targeted and inclusive reform efforts can serve as the foundation for a more equitable and psychologically enriching education system.

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